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ABSTRACT

In recognition that remedial writing students, regardless of age, are accustomed to failure in written English, instructors of Glen Oaks Community College's developmental writing classes emphasize positive attitudes and activities, students' responsibility for their success or failure, and positive and reassuring instructor attitudes. The writing program follows the principles of Reality Therapy, whereby an individual has the power to make his/her own choices, including success and failure. While instructors support the student and provide examples by their own behavior, they do not assume responsibility for the student's success or failure. Instructors do not accept excuses, but assist the student in evaluating the situation and recognizing the ramifications of his/her behavior. Activities intended to promote positive attitudes include the following: (1) starting the class off with a "question of the day" in place of roll; (2) an ungraded weekly journal assignment on which the instructor makes only positive comments; (3) focusing on the process used to arrive at answers, rather than labeling answers as "wrong"; (4) student attendance at computer lab once a week where they work with tutorials coordinated with classwork and a simple word processing program used for writing exercises; and (5) enabling students to see the progress they have made by making the final assignment of the quarter a revision of their first assignment. (WJT)

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MOTIVATING STUDENTS IN DEVELOPMENTAL WRITING PROGRAMS

Presented at
5th Annual L.A.N.D.
Conferenc.
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East Lansing, Michigan

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OUTLINE

I Presumptions about typical developmental students

A. 18 to 20 year olds

1. inadequate background
2. assume adequacy
3. placed in classes by assessment test and/or counselor
4. lack of real success in past classes
5. lack of experience in course material
6. lack of commitment to course and success

B. 21+ year olds

1. inadequate backgrounds (to lesser degree)
2. more realistic about inadequacies
3. placed in classes by choice, assessment test, and/or counselor
4. some lack of success in past courses
5. some experience in course materials
6. some commitment to course and success

II Approaches

A. Introduce successful experiences

1. attitude of instructor
2. activities with positive results
   a. question of the day
   b. journal
   c. never a "wrong" answer in class
   d. individual folders
   e. computer activities
   f. beginning/end assignment

B. Emphasize responsibility: Glasser's theory of Reality Therapy

1. Student
   a. chooses success or failure
   b. must understand choices, past and present
   c. must choose to choose successful behavior as individual responsibility

2. Faculty
   a. must become involved with student
   b. helps student choose successful behaviors
   c. does not assume responsibility for student behavior
   d. helps student formulate plan for successful behavior
   e. reinforces success with own behavior
   f. accepts no excuses -- don't ask "why" questions
   g. is patient and understanding

Before we begin discussing motivation in developmental writing classes, it is necessary to understand something about the students we work with at Glen Oaks Community College. Most developmental writing classes are almost equally divided into two groups of students, the traditional 18 to 20 year olds and those over 21; the average age of our students is 29. These two groups of students bring with them different approaches and problems to the same classroom.

The typical traditional student has had an inadequate background in written communication, but seems to assume that he/she is competent in written English. The assessment tests (ASSET and an in-house writing sample) used to place these students usually provide an unhappy surprise for the students if they are placed below college composition level. Eventually the student may grudgingly admit to having had difficulty in the past with English classes and/or to having had very little real experience with written English during high school. The result is an attitude of "I never really liked this stuff, I never really did well in this stuff, and I don't really care about it now."

The situation upon entrance for nontraditional students over 21 is slightly different. While they may also have an

inadequate background in written English, these students are less severely affected than younger students. In fact, students over 30 often have a far better background than the "younger generation." In general, these student lack confidence in the abilities they do have, and willingly take developmental courses by choice, by assessment test placement, or on the advice of a counselor. While they may be aware of their problems with written English, they have usually had some experience with the need to write standard English, and they are committed to succeeding in the course because of individual goals and plans for the future.

As we have worked to design a developmental writing program at Glen Oaks, we have forced ourselves to remember that these students we work with are accustomed to failing where written English is concerned. n deed, the majority of enrolled students "failed" the writing sample placement test for English Composition. To immediately begin the process of turning that condition around, we limit class size to fifteen, and we begin the very first day of class to present experiences which provide a variety of absolute successes. Even in the simplest way, this bit of encouragement can make the difference for some.

The first step in this development toward success is to encourage the instructor to have a positive and reassuring attitude with the students. All instructors who teach

developmental writing courses use the same books, teach toward the same goals and objectives, and share the same interest in student success. While each instructor uses individual methods and approaches, all are willing to spend extra time and effort beyond class schedules to work with students. All are sensitive to learning disabilities, and some have been specifically trained to use particular methods appropriate for those students with disabilities. No instructor is assigned a developmental writing course without agreeing to these principles.

The first simple step toward positive attitudes in the classroom occurs when we take attendance. We do not call roll, but rather we ask the "question of the day," designed to make the students think about themselves and the others in the room. The first day's question is always "where are you from?" Subsequent questions include things like "what classes are you taking," Do you have children," what's your favorite food," etc., anything that gets the students thinking and sharing thoughts and opinions.

A second very successful activity is the required weekly journal. Each student must write a full page on either a suggested topic - considered to be general enough for everyone to write about but also thought provoking - or a topic of the student's own choosing. Once a week the instructor reads all the journal entries for the week,

giving only positive comments instead of grades. Yes, sometimes it is almost impossible to find something positive to say, but we always manage something. The students look forward to every comment, and often share unique thoughts and feelings. Since the purpose of the exercise is to have the students put ideas into written form, whatever encouragement they receive must be positive reinforcement.

When the instructor is working with the class and asks for the answer to a question, the instructor never says "that's wrong." The correct answer is sometimes less important than the thought process used to discover the correct answer. The wrong answer is always threatening and embarassing for the student. By asking additional questions - "How did you get that answer?" "Is there another way to look at this problem?" "Where would you look to find this concept?" - the instructor is more likely to lead the students toward correct reasoning not just a correct answer.

Although attendance is required in our classes, students are inevitably absent for one reason or another. In order to facilitate their return and to encourage them to keep up with the rest of the class, we have a separate filing cabinet in the Academic Opportunities Center (our learning assistance center) where we keep a file folder for each individual student. Any returned papers, classwork, messages, etc. can be left for the student to retrieve at will, with or without the instructor present.

One day a week all students attend computer lab where they work on two different kinds of software, tutorials coordinated with classwork and a simple word processing program used for writing exercises. Most students enjoy the self-paced individualized materials, and they are able to accomplish the required number of assignments. They actually become excited by the hard copies of their work that they learn to print. All lab materials are kept in the Academic Opportunities Center during non-lab times for the students' convenience and use, and students are encouraged to use their computer skills for reports and assignments for other classes. The staff of the Center provides active support for the developmental students and their work.

The first day of class each semester, the students are given an assignment to write a paragraph for the following class. Without the students' knowledge, the instructor makes copies of the assignments before they are corrected and returned. The final assignment of the semester is based on that first paper. When the students receive the copy of their papers, many are shocked and then amused by the now recognizably poor attempts at communication. They may groan when they learn that the new assignment is to redo/revise/redesign the first assignment, but secretly, they love the challenge of their own material. Most will attack the original with great energy, proving to themselves how much they have

improved and changed during the semester. Even those students who have only made modest progress during the semester are able to find positive results from the assignment.

Why do we at Glen Oaks go to such great lengths to reinforce positive attitudes in our developmental students? We are attempting to follow the principles of Reality Therapy (W. Glasser, 1965) in order to encourage our students to achieve to their full potential.

Reality Therapy was originally a psychiatric counseling approach developed during the 1960's. It was quickly recognized as an important educational concept as well. The general principle is that each individual chooses what happens to him or her, including success and failure. The problem is that most individuals don't realize this. While the individual will always take credit for successes (I passed the test! I got my license. I won the game.), failure is always someone else's fault. (That teacher failed me. My employer cheated me out of my raise. Nobody wants me to get ahead in the world.) The solution may seem deceptively simple; each individual must chose to be responsible for his or her own choices, hopefully choices for successful experiences. It is possible for this to happen once the individual recognizes the choices he or she has made in the past and the effects these have had on his/her life.

The instructor in any course can assist a student in becoming more success-oriented, but the instructor must be willing to become involved with that student, supporting the student and reinforcing the actions chosen. The instructor does not, however, assume responsibility for the student or the actions; the theory leads the student to develop a greater sense of responsibility for his/her own actions. Setting examples by his/her own behavior, the instructor helps the student formulate a plan for successful behaviors. For example, let's say that a student has a real problem with tardiness and often neglects to turn in assignments because he was not present when the assignments were collected. This is a situation which will produce a failure experience. The instructor asks the student to evaluate the situation (see list of suggested questions attached), and then helps student realize the ramifications of his/her behavior. Without accepting excuses, the instructor assists the student in choosing to be on time, to turn in assignments, to do what needs to be done to succeed. If, on the other hand, the instructor is always late for class himself, the theory will not work!

One of the most difficult concepts to practice is the concept of accepting no excuses for anything. If an instructor asks "why did you fail the test," of course the student will concoct many reasons that "caused him to fail.

To avoid the empty but handy excuses, ask questions that are open-ended -"How did you study? What did you do? What do you need to do to pass the course?" These are questions that help the student recognize a plan of action. Even though there truly are legitimate excuses for some situations, the instructor must learn to avoid asking questions that give excuses as answers.

Reality Therapy sounds quite simple. It is simple, but that doesn't mean it is easy to accomplish. Reality Therapy is not a cure-all or an answer to all of life's problems. It is a legitimate approach to dealing with ourselves and those around us in order to achieve greater success in life. It requires patience and understanding - of ourselves and those around us- and it does work.

During and following the actual presentation at the L.A.N.D. Conference, there were many questions posed by the audience. Some of those questions added details that were important for the audience. While it is not possible to remember or include those questions, at least it is possible to offer to answer any questions the reader may have at this point.

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SOME KEY QUESTIONS FOR THE TEACHER/COUNSELOR
APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES OF REALITY THERAPY

What are you doing?

Is what you are doing helping you out?

Is what you are doing the best choice for you?

Is what you are doing hurting anyone you care about?

What will happen if you keep on doing this?

What else could you do?

Who is effected by what you do?

What happens when you do that?

What are you willing to do?

If _____ happens are you still willing to do it?

What can I do to help?

What ideas do you have?

What makes you think this is a good plan?

Do you still want to do it?

Who could help you do it?

NOTE: Avoid asking questions that can be answered "yes" or "no".

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